

Sociocultural Adjustment of International Students in Higher Education: A Case Study of Yemeni Postgraduate Students

Ali Abdullah Ali Alghail, School of Humanities, Universiti Sains Malaysia

Sarjit Kaur, School of Humanities, Universiti Sains Malaysia & Associate Research Fellow, National Higher Education Research Institute

Abstract

This article presents the findings of a study that examined the sociocultural adjustment of Yemeni postgraduate students in a public university in Malaysia. Data collection included a questionnaire, journal writings and focus group interviews. The analysis of data revealed that the sociocultural adjustment difficulties faced by Yemeni postgraduate students in the public university include among others, making friends, getting used to the local food, understanding cultural differences, understanding the local accent/language and dealing with people in authority. To overcome such sociocultural difficulties, the Yemeni postgraduate students either remained passive or adapted themselves to the norms of the new environment. The findings reveal that these specific sociocultural difficulties faced by the Yemeni postgraduate students should be handled carefully by university administrators to allow the postgraduates to experience a more positive academic student experience. The findings reported contribute to the ongoing interest of research into the experience of international students in the Malaysian landscape of higher education as well as in other higher education contexts.

Introduction

Due to the importance of higher education as an essential tool for developing a knowledge-based society, there has been a rapid increase in the number of international students pursuing higher education worldwide. Malaysia is one country that has embarked on various active and strategic promotions in order to attract more international students (Abiddin & Ismail, 2009). As a result of these successful efforts, Malaysian universities have witnessed an increase in the number of international students from different countries in the Middle East, Africa and some Asian counties (Ooi, Kaur & Sirat, 2009; Yusliza & Chelliah, 2010). Among Arab counties, the government of Yemen has been granting scholarships to Yemeni students to pursue their higher education in some Malaysian universities and colleges.

International students in Malaysian universities come from various diverse academic backgrounds. Undoubtedly, this poses different academic and sociocultural difficulties for these students while they attempt to negotiate the dominant literacies of the academic communities in Malaysian higher education institutions. Furthermore, international students' cultural backgrounds may also affect their sociocultural adjustment. Similarly, the domestic higher education institution can play an important part in helping the international students adjust to their new cultural context in terms of institutional policies and practices.

International students pursuing their higher education studies in higher education institutions in Malaysia face many challenges. This is because international students are a heterogeneous group of students who face many barriers and challenges that hamper their learning experiences (Pandian, 2008). As a result of this, the diversity of international students should be taken into account because they do encounter various dilemmas in their educational and social contexts. One such aspect that is related to the experience of international students in Malaysia is sociocultural adjustment. This refers to the level of acquisition of culturally

appropriate skills and the ability to interact with others in the culture of the host country (Ward & Kennedy, 1999). The theory of adjustment, which is referred to as acculturation, focuses on understanding the adaptation processes and cultural changes of minority groups as they experience first-hand contact with a dominant culture (Sodowsky & Plake, 1992). This study reports on Yemeni postgraduate students' perceptions of their sociocultural adjustment difficulties and the coping strategies they employ while studying in a public university in Malaysia.

Although there is recent attention on analysing and exploring international students' academic experiences (Sugimura, 2008; Phakiti & Li, 2011), few studies have explored the sociocultural adjustment of international students in Malaysia. In view of this fact, Yusliza (2011:3) argues that "although the number of international students on campuses continues to increase; only a limited number of recently published studies have examined this topic in Malaysia". Furthermore, Yusliza (2010:36) has concluded that "as the number of international students entering Malaysian universities increase, the need to understand and address their cross-cultural adjustment to this country becomes more important". Accordingly, this study presents findings on the following two issues: the perceptions of Yemeni postgraduate students of their sociocultural adjustment problems and the strategies they use to overcome these difficulties. The findings and recommendations of this study can help educational leaders and their higher education institutions to work on facilitating these students' journey through the educational system. Such studies can shed further light on how international students perceive the sociocultural adjustment problems they face because the factors that affect international students' psychological and sociocultural adjustment problems (such as English language proficiency, social support and some personality variables) can impact their academic achievement (Yuzliza, 2010).

This study is a mixed methods research in which data were collected using both quantitative and qualitative methods.

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The quantitative data were collected using a questionnaire that adopted items on students' academic difficulties from Hyland (1997) and Evans and Green (2007). Meanwhile, items on international students' sociocultural adjustment were adapted from Ward and Kennedy (1999). The qualitative data were collected employing two methods of data collection: focus group interviews with 30 respondents and journal writing by 21 respondents. While quantitative data from the 92 completed student questionnaires were analysed using Statistical Package for the Social (SPSS), qualitative data were analysed through content analysis in which data were transcribed and coded thematically.

Sociocultural Adjustment of Yemeni Postgraduate Students

The analysis of the data collected showed that the behavioural adjustment faced by Yemeni postgraduate students include understanding cultural differences, making friends, seeing things from the locals' point of view, taking a local perspective on the culture, dealing with someone unpleasant or aggressive people, talking about themselves with others, taking a local perspective on the culture, getting used to the local food or finding the food they enjoy, making themselves understood, going to social events, understanding the local value system, communicating with people of a different ethnic group, relating to members of the opposite sex and being able to see two sides of an intercultural issue.

With reference to the cognitive adjustment, dealing with people of higher status, dealing with people in authority and understanding the local accent/language were perceived as great difficulties by Yemeni postgraduate students. Similar to the findings of Baker and Luke (1991) and Myles and Cheng (2003), sociocultural adjustment of international students is associated with psychological and sociocultural factors such as abilities of both international and local students to mix with each other and handle cultural differences. This study has revealed that Yemeni postgraduate students' sociocultural adjustment problems can be traced to the cultural differences and the norms and beliefs these students bring to the Malaysian context.

Unlike the findings of studies conducted by Myles and Cheng (2003) who found that international students have

no adjustment problems related to their sociocultural life in the host countries, the current study shows that Yemeni postgraduate students faced several adjustment difficulties due to the cultural and social differences between their culture and the multi-cultures of the host country, Malaysia.

Also, similar to the findings of studies conducted by Novera (2004), Li and Gasser (2005) and Brown and Holloway (2008), the current study reveals that Yemeni postgraduate students face sociocultural adjustment difficulties due to their unfamiliarity with the host nation's cultural norms. This study reveals that the top sociocultural adjustment for Yemeni students include understanding cultural differences, making friends, seeing things from the locals' point of view and taking a local perspective on the Malaysian culture.

Overcoming Sociocultural Adjustment Problems

With reference to the cognitive adjustment difficulties faced by Yemeni postgraduate students, the analysis of quantitative and qualitative data indicates that the students depend on three strategies to overcome their cognitive adjustment: having friendships with other international students and students from their countries, trying to find suitable food for themselves on campus and outside campus and accommodating themselves to the difficulties they may face. The strategy of adaptation to the sociocultural difficulties of the host country is known as acculturation one in which international students may accept some changes as being influenced by the culture, customs and social institutions of the host country.

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The quantitative findings (relating to students' academic difficulties in the language skills of speaking, reading, writing and listening) show that the strategies Yemeni postgraduate students employ to adjust themselves may be more effective when the society in the host country show positive attitudes towards them. In other words, the individual's acculturation is not only impacted by his/her own strategies and attitudes, but is also inevitably affected by the context of the host country. The Yemeni postgraduate students perceive that their adaptability can be defined as the capacity for an individual to suspend or change behaviour common to his or her native culture, to learn and accommodate to some of the new cultural ways of doing and ultimately “find ways to manage the dynamics of cultural difference/unfamiliarity,

intergroup posture and the accompanying stress" (Kim, 1991: 268).

Conclusion

The experiences of all international students can be more beneficial and less stressful if higher education institutions in Malaysia take into account the various adjustment difficulties faced by these students, including the sociocultural ones. Host higher education institutions in Malaysia cannot consider their own conceptions of teaching and learning as the standard norms but instead they need to show awareness that international students bring with them slightly different conceptions of learning and these need to be accommodated by the institutions in some way. The differences that international students bring with them are of great value because they can inform authorities on how to best provide suitable support and assistance to future students. Thus, understanding and acknowledging the similarities and differences and taking the necessary steps to address them can ensure a more positive learning environment for international students.

To inculcate positive learning experiences among international students, higher education institutions in Malaysia should invest resources to address these students' unique needs and they should be aware of cultural common grounds as well as barriers, differences in the educational systems and other frustrations these students may come across in adjusting to the academic and sociocultural environment. University administrators and authorities should not only be aware of the problems many international students face in adjusting to the academic environment but they should strive to provide ways that can help these students adjust more successfully into the academic and cultural life of the institution. In addition to these procedures, social support and programmes on stress management can be suggestions that can be useful to universities in Malaysia in order to facilitate the academic and sociocultural life of international students. Future research can investigate, using experimental designs or correlational studies, the impact of such sociocultural factors on the achievement and the development of international students in Malaysian universities.

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